

Graffiti Memories by Jenzia Burgos

Welcome to the South Bronx; don't be stiff now, alright? Loosen up. Right now, you're in a neighborhood called Hunts Point.

You're gonna walk toward East 163rd Street, straight down.

Hunt's Point . . . This is my 'hood. You know that food you had for dinner last night? It passed right through here, came into this city through the Hunts Point Market, one of the largest food distribution facilities in the whole world. You wouldn't eat without the Bronx. This place feeds you, and it feeds me, too.

Ain't nobody appreciating this place, though. Except maybe the people from here, people raised on hip-hop and salsa. But then, it seems like not a whole lot of folks appreciate those people, either. Imma help you do a little bit of that today.

You at 163rd yet? You're gonna turn left to walk down Southern Boulevard. You're gonna leave behind that *loco* shouting about *Jesus* Cristo—shit, I shouldn't call 'em crazy though. At least he believes in something, right?

You're gonna cross the road, to walk down the side of the street where there's a Bank of America. Coming up after that, there's also gonna be some furniture stores.

You know, this area has changed *so* much. All these stores, they weren't even here five years ago. All these buildings are getting renovated too now—two on this block used to be homeless shelters. Those with the scaffolding—you see that? Right up ahead.

But one day, I see these white guys—in suits and carrying briefcases—and ain't nobody wearing suits and carrying briefcases around here on the daily, you know what I'm saying? Anyway, these guys are scoping out the buildings, talking to the Landlord out front and shit. Two weeks later, the scaffolding was put up. One month after that, I'm seeing families moving out with their stuff in trash bags. That's some bullshit.

One of the kids from this building, the last one here under the scaffolding, he passed away earlier that summer. I always saw him on the block, he had these bleached dreads and the *flyest* kicks. Do you see a scaffolding pole, somewhere to your left? It's the one with red ribbon on it. Well, when you see it, why don't you stop by it for a second.

That ribbon—it's all that's left from his memorial. Look around. All around: all around you the sidewalk was covered in candles, drawings, graffiti—everyone was writing messages. You could hardly walk down the block for an entire month; his friends came out every day, lighting candles, and they just sat around here—just crying. I mean, he

was only sixteen; of course he was loved. Poor kid died of an asthma attack. Everyone said it was 'cause the building was filled with mold.

Let's go. But we'll stop again, in just a second. Look across the street, to your right; you see that deli with the green awning? Pura Vida Deli Grocery? Well, stop when you see it.

Right next to it is that gray wall. It was also a memorial, once. It was this beautiful portrait done by the graffiti group TATS Cru. The guy who died, his name was Raphael. He was shot by the police. He was unarmed, obviously. He was coming up out the elevator at the train station one day, and when the doors opened: he was shot. They thought he was someone else; apparently, he fit the description of some other brown guy who looked nothing like him. You know how it goes. That memorial was beautiful though. And then, it just disappeared one afternoon, like nothing.

I was walking from the train, and I noticed it had just been covered up with that boring gray paint. Someone else bought up the property, I guess.

Anyway, come on—we gotta keep going. We're gonna keep walking straight, to Barretto Street right on this corner.

You know, I can't say that shit like that doesn't make me angry, though. I mean, how do you do that? Just cover up a memorial like nothing? It's like defacing a gravestone. But none of these people who do it really care.

They don't care that they're erasing histories with what they're doing. But they can't erase memory. And I guess that makes me lucky—'cause I remember everything about this place that I love.

When you're at Barretto, turn left. We're gonna walk up toward the Bruckner Boulevard. You see that gated garden across the street—that's new, too. And, it's a memorial garden, founded in memory of Sister Thomas. She was this really sweet nun who gave so much of her life to helping this neighborhood. She lived in my building; she passed a few years ago. So the neighborhood rallied together to make that garden. Man, we held fundraisers for years until it was finally built. That's the thing – it was built by *us* and for *us*, so it's here to stay.

Careful once you reach the Bruckner. We're gonna cross it—don't worry, there's traffic lights—but just pay attention.

I love the Bruckner Boulevard. There's never traffic jams. I always used to say that this sound—whoosing cars—it's my New York City equivalent to a house on the beach. Listen to that; sounds just like waves, don't you think?

Once you've crossed, we're just gonna keep walking straight. You'll know you're going the right way if you see Garrison Avenue in the distance.

This whole 'hood used to be stomping grounds for graffiti artists back in the day, in the '70s and the '80s. They called themselves writers, and to mark up a wall with graffiti was to "bomb" it. For these kids—'cause really, most of them were just that, kids—graffiti was one of their only outlets. I mean, hip-hop hit the scene at the same time; but the only ones rolling up to become DJ's were those who had a couple extra bucks to buy their own equipment. So poor kids—they had graffiti. It was easy enough to pop into your local hardware store and steal a few cans of spray paint; it was enough to be a part of something.

Look at this wall up ahead. It's the Fort Apache Wall, former location of the notorious 41st Precinct. Ever seen that movie, *Fort Apache*? Some Hollywood picture starring Paul Newman. Well, when the Bronx was a warzone back in the '70s, the precinct gave themselves that nickname. Fort Apache—as if surrounded by savage brown folks. That shit got them a whole movie to glamorize their efforts.

This wall is a reclamation, then. You gotta love it for that.

Keep walking straight—along this wall, to your left, is the *Know Your Rights* graffiti. Pretty incredible, I think. I remember seeing it for the first time when I was a kid, thinking how sad it was that something like this was needed in the first place, you know? I mean, you'd never see this anywhere but the 'hood, cause we're the ones being targeted. But I'm glad it exists. And it's here to stay, too—this building is now owned by that same graffiti group, TATS Cru, that I mentioned earlier. It's a gallery and an arts community center now. Talk about reclaiming, huh!

Come on—let's just keep walking down this street.

It's a little sketchy looking around here, I know. But you think this is bad? Shit. You can't even begin to know what *bad* was in the Bronx. Back in the '70s, the South Bronx was on fire—literally, and figuratively. Everywhere you looked, buildings were burning.

Arson. Abandoned Buildings. Empty Lots.

People were starving, strung-out, they were broke, busted and disgusted. And ain't nobody cared about helping these people. Policing them? Oh yeah. Getting them jobs, opportunities, resources, better schools? Nah. Today, this area is still one of the most impoverished places in America—but now you got tour groups coming up and "ghetto gawking." The *Times* named the South Bronx one of the hottest New York City destinations—like the poverty of black and brown folks is *cool* or some shit. Don't get me wrong, we got culture alright. But unless you're invited, it ain't yours to absorb. And

some white tour guide transplant from Oklahoma isn't gonna give you an authentic taste anyway.

We should be approaching Lafayette Avenue soon. When you get there, stop at the corner. You should see a church across the street—Corpus Christi Monastery, actually—and right next to it, a basketball court and a field named after Jose Caraballo. We're gonna cross to that side of the street. Be careful now, no traffic lights here—so make sure you look. And when you're there, let's make a left turn. You should walk toward Manida Street, and keep walking straight.

I'm taking you somewhere special. Those guys I keep mentioning—TATs Cru—it's one of their spots. You know, they're responsible for nearly every graffiti wall still around here. They got tag names like Bio, Nicer, BG183, Crash, Lobster—all those guys, they have talent like none other. I mean, think about *hard* it is to wield a spray paint can like a paintbrush? They make it seem effortless.

I used to come to this place all the time when I was younger; my dad brought me there for the first time when I was nine. My dad—he used to be a graffiti writer too. A rascal with a spray paint can, he was a full six feet tall at fifteen years old; but lanky as hell. It made him perfect for climbing onto those train cars. You remember when we crossed the Bruckner Boulevard? Right below that street we crossed over, there's a subway yard. The subways park there at night. So, my dad used to climb down there with his friends, and they'd hoist him up between two train cars, and he'd spray 'em both, back to back, in a time crunch before the morning rush.

When they finished “bombing,” they'd all get up at sunrise and run up to a rooftop somewhere uptown. The 6 line, that train you took to, it goes above ground right after Hunts Point Avenue. So, they'd sit on a rooftop somewhere along Whitlock avenue with instant cameras in hand, ready to see their masterpiece unveiled. My dad still has those Polaroids. He wasn't half bad.

When you see Coster Street, get ready to cross to where there's the deli with a blue business sign. Then you're gonna turn right, to walk up Hunts Point Avenue. We'll walk down this avenue for a while.

Anyway, so my dad was no member of TATs Cru, though. Most kids weren't virtuosos—so yeah, maybe when they bombed those subway cars, it looked a little ugly. But ugly to who, you know? White rich folks were always mad about that shit—like it was polluting their vision of grace, of order. But since when should art equal sanctity? And let me make it clear: graffiti *is* art. How you gonna tell me that my dad, who spent days of his life bombing those trains, who ate, slept, and breathed graffiti, was no artist? How you gonna hold the value of his work below some asshole who shits red paint on a canvas and gets it

sold for a million to some bougie-ass museum? Is it in a name? The color of my dad's skin? His access? His network? Yeah. You know it is.

Graffiti wasn't valued then because it was an art made for and by black and brown folks in *the* most poverty, crime-stricken place in America. Ain't no denying it. White hippies spewing their ugly shit got it elevated to a position of power and praise, while my dad and his friends starting getting arrested.

Again, most of those guys were just kids. And usually, kids decide to run from the police. Big mistake though. My dad watched plenty of his friends get kicked, spit on, laughed at, and beaten into the ground by the police. Resisting arrest, they always said. But is a *kid* really capable of resisting? You ever think he might just be *scared* of you?

You should be coming up on Faile Street soon—you'll see the sign is practically hanging off the pole. Ironical, huh? Just keep walking straight/

Growing up in the Bronx, I guess I see beauty and grace in a different way. Those stiff ass folks with no lens of seeing a world that doesn't fit their view – they all got what they wanted. Graffiti seemingly disappeared. But that loss was heart wrenching. Fuck the subways needing to look clean and white, sterile like fucking hospitals – this is New York City. I don't get up in the morning and wish the trash on the side of my street looked prettier. I don't see graffiti and wish the wall was uniform, just painted one shade. Nah.

These streets, that broken glass on the corner, *el loco* at Hunts Point, graffiti peppered on walls—it's all *me*. But this city doesn't always love me. It loves those who can exploit me, appropriate me, commodify me. It sold its soul—it loves order, purity, big money. It loves the transplants who kick out a family of six in Astoria, leaving them out on the streets. It loves the urban developers who gut and purge poor folks from their communities. Its loves silencing art, the creativity of people whose only outlet is their imagination, and their talent—the only things they can even afford.

You should see Spofford Avenue yet? Well, when you do, you're gotta cross to walk on the other side. In the middle of the road, there's that little island with a pole, the sign says Bryant avenue. Cross to that, then turn to your left, in the direction of the gray sheet metal walls. You're gonna walk up Spofford avenue now, just heading straight.

I should just say it. We're really heading to a funeral. TATs Cru—that legendary graffiti group – they had decades-old masterpiece in this neighborhood. A two-hundred-foot stretch of sprawling graffiti, murals covering every inch of an old auto warehouse. They came together every year to blast it clean and start all over again, coming up with murals more incredible than those from the year before. I would come with my dad every year and we'd check out what they created. Their last time, back in 2015, I came on the very

day they were finishing up and tagging the wall, signatures on the incredible pieces they'd made. They didn't know it would be their last time at this wall. Decades of coming back, of devotion—and it was all gonna be swept away from them.

You're gonna see Whittier Street—if you've already passed it, you're looking for the corner of Drake Street and Spofford Avenue right after. When you're there, then stop. That's where we wanna be.

That building you see—that short, ugly gray and blue shit—maybe some trucks from the market are parked out here, in the way. But that building, that wall you're facing—the one that goes on for nearly a block—this is where it was . . .

We're here to remember. Look at that wall. Peel back the paint with your mind. Think about it: swirling neon colors coalescing; bubble letters bumping up against each other; portraits; visions straight out of nightmares and dreams, blasted all the way up and down the wall. Why don't you go up next to it? Stand in front, and look up, then look to your right. Imagine the immensity of a mural like that.

My breath was knocked out of me when I came back here one day to see it all gone. Swept away, like it never existed.

So I guess I brought you here 'cause someone's gotta remember it, right? And no one else will build a memorial to graffiti's past. So let this walk be that. Take a minute. Pay your respects. Then go home, and don't forget.

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